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National Intelligence Bulletin

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USSR

Rumors circulating among newsmen and diplomats in Moscow describe an air of unease within the Soviet leadership. The rumors follow a period in which some of General Secretary Brezhnev's programs and initiatives have struck snags. Nonetheless, Brezhnev's authority and policies apparently remain intact. He may have felt it prudent, however, to accommodate more fully other viewpoints on some elements of his policies.

Postponement of Brezhnev's highly touted visit to Egypt is, at a minimum, an unwanted embarrassment. His health problems clearly played a part in the decision to put off the trip, but it is also likely that Moscow had been unable to gain Cairo's agreement on political questions, particularly those related to the Soviet role in Middle East peace negotiations.

Brezhnev has not appeared in public since December 24, a factor which has provided grist for the rumor mill.

In addition to his problems with the Egyptians, difficulties surfaced last month regarding Brezhnev's twin programs of consumer welfare and detente--particularly economic relations with the US. A plenum meeting of the party Central Committee opened and closed on December 16, leaving an unusual one-day gap before the USSR Supreme Soviet session convened on December 18. The timing suggested that a two-day plenum once may have been planned and then, for unknown reasons, cut short. Brezhnev spoke on domestic and foreign policy at the plenum.

The Central Committee and the Supreme Soviet approved the economic plan for 1975 that calls for group A industries, largely producer goods, to grow at a higher rate than group B industries, largely consumer goods.

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This scheme reverses the rates of growth set forth in the 1971-75 plan. Those rates were linked, at least in propaganda, with Brezhnev's promise to improve living standards, which was called the "main task" of this and future five-year plans.

Two days after the plenum, Moscow published Foreign Minister Gromyko's letter of October 26 to Secretary Kissinger and a Tass statement; both denied that the Soviet Union had agreed to foreign demands on emigration in connection with US foreign trade legislation. Soviet media have turned from euphoric treatment of the recent US-USSR summit to criticism of US trade restrictions and to hints of negative consequences for relations with the US.

Some of these developments were beyond Brezhnev's control, but they do constitute setbacks to policies closely associated with him. Furthermore, the policies affected are among those that have always been viewed skeptically by at least some members of Soviet officialdom.

Thus far, Brezhnev's authority does not appear to be impaired nor has the direction of Soviet policy--especially the importance attached to detente with the US--changed. There are, however, many unknowns in the present equation. If Brezhnev is unable to return soon to work and to demonstrate that he retains the initiative in policy matters, his political position would almost certainly be weakened.

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EGYPT

Since the violent labor demonstration in Cairo last week, Egyptian security authorities have arrested at least 200, and possibly as many as 400, members of the outlawed but recently resurgent Communist Party. A number of radical leftist youths have also been arrested.

Leftist agitators for some time have been attempting to stir up trouble among labor and student groups. Government authorities say these activists had begun to operate with relative impunity, in the expectation that the government would not interfere while the visit of Soviet party chief Brezhnev was still pending. [REDACTED]

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There is no concrete evidence of Soviet involvement with Egyptian Communist or leftist elements. Moscow may well, however, have discreetly encouraged the Communists to exploit legitimate popular grievances in the hope of increasing pressure on President Sadat. Despite the openly pro-Soviet line espoused by some of the agitators, the Egyptian government has made no charges, either publicly or privately, of Soviet involvement. In any case, the Soviets, who have openly expressed chagrin over what they regard as Sadat's rightward drift on economic matters, will obviously not be pleased with the government's move against Egyptian Communists.

At the same time that the government is moving against agitators, it is attempting to respond to popular grievances. The cabinet has announced a decision, actually reached before the demonstration, to allocate additional funds for the immediate import of consumer goods that are in short supply. The government has also promised to review the draft of an unpopular labor reform bill.

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These measures are not likely to satisfy basic consumer demands. Popular discontent will probably continue for some time and could stimulate further disturbances, despite the moves to thwart known agitators.

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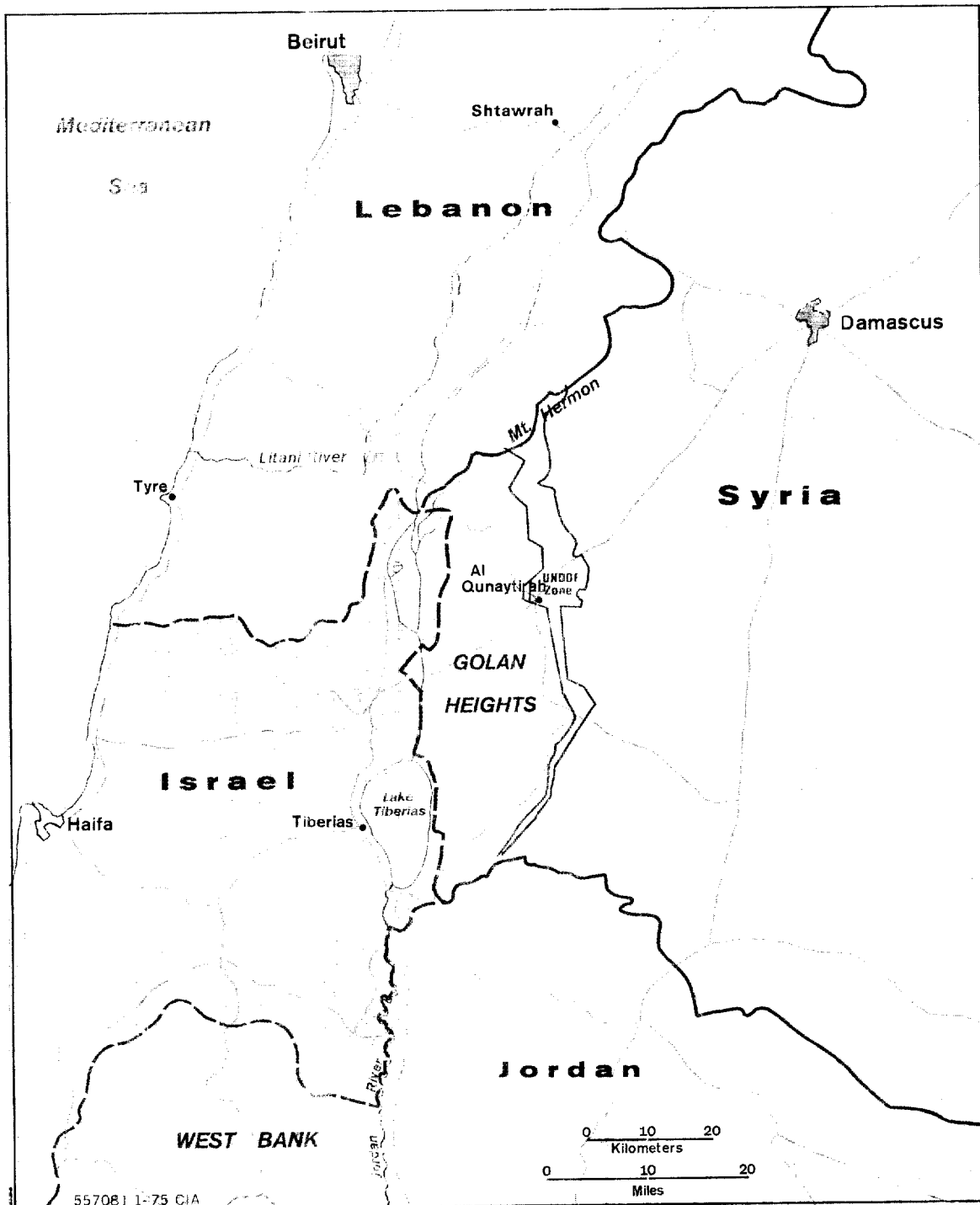
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LEBANON-SYRIA

Syrian President Asad concluded a day of talks with Lebanese President Franjiyah yesterday, with public statements promising Syria's full and unconditional support for Lebanon. Asad said Damascus will "regard any attack on Lebanon as an attack on Syria itself."

Yesterday's meeting in Shtawrah, Lebanon, is the latest of several signs of improvement in the usually strained relations between the two governments. Although Asad pledged to meet any Lebanese requests for help, preliminary reports of the meeting do not indicate what concrete military assistance, if any, Syria will provide. Franjiyah is considered willing to accept conventional antiaircraft weapons, but reluctant to receive more sophisticated weapons--such as the SA-6 antiaircraft missile system--that might bring Syrian or other foreign troops to Lebanon, which in turn might invite a strong Israeli action.

The Lebanese failed to take advantage of offers of assistance tendered by the other Arab states at a meeting of the Arab League Defense Council in Cairo last July. The more radical states, notably Libya, have continued to repeat their offers, drawing attention to the Lebanese government's inactivity and relative impotence.

Franjiyah's aim in pursuing cooperation with the Syrians at this time is largely to still the criticism he is receiving from his leftist and Muslim domestic opponents. With Israeli incursions into southern Lebanon continuing, these critics have refused to settle for the government's revival of its usual strategy of complaining to the UN Security Council and promising to strengthen Lebanese forces in southern Lebanon.

The leader of southern Lebanon's important Shiite Muslim sect early this week publicly spoke of what he called the "big probability" of an Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon during the first half of 1975. The Lebanese have long been concerned that the Israelis are looking for an excuse to occupy southern Lebanon as far north as the Litani River.

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ETHIOPIA

Some Eritrean rebel leaders have rebuffed the recent attempts by the ruling military council to begin negotiations aimed at ending the insurgency on a basis that preserves the territorial integrity of Ethiopia.

In a statement issued in Cairo on January 6, exiled leaders of one of the two major insurgent factions said they would talk with the council only to arrange the withdrawal of army troops from Eritrea. They reiterated demands for complete independence, and said their group was ready to increase its combat operations.

The exiles do not necessarily speak even for their entire faction. Insurgents within Eritrea, who may include members of the exiles' faction, reportedly have been holding talks with local Eritrean leaders on the possibility of direct negotiations with the council.



Nui Ba Den, Tay Ninh Province



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FOR THE RECORD

South Vietnam: South Vietnamese forces were forced from their position atop Nui Ba Den--Black Virgin Mountain--just outside Tay Ninh City yesterday, following several weeks of determined Communist attacks. Nui Ba Den rises abruptly to over 3,000 feet from the flat surrounding countryside, and since 1964 it has been used by the South Vietnamese as an observation post and communications site. The major factor behind its loss was the government's inability to resupply the outpost because of intense Communist anti-aircraft fire.

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Singapore: Authorities in Singapore have decided to deny for the time being Soviet naval access to the restricted Sembawang shipyard, which has concentrated on servicing Commonwealth and US naval vessels. The decision, however, was meant only to chastise the Soviets for misrepresenting, as a commercial vessel, a navy oiler tentatively scheduled for overhauling next month. It does not rule out future Soviet use of the shipyard. The Singaporeans have in fact made it clear that they intend to solicit Soviet ship repair business to make up for declining US and UK use of the Sembawang facilities.

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